

Tough Day for LBJ

The Gerstlers are running late. Jeremiah checks his watch, trying not to rush Molly, but she can't stop fussing with her outfit and hairdo. The cocktail party is supposed to be a relaxed affair – a summer get-together for the political science faculty – but when spouses are invited, it's never informal. With his DC experience, Jeremiah expects a warm welcome from his new colleagues. If someone asks if he's rubbed elbows with LBJ and JFK, he'll nod and say, "Sure, sure. And don't forget Ike! What's he, chopped liver?"

Through the window a cricket chirps at regular intervals, a singular sound he'd never have distinguished in the city, but here in their quiet new Berkshires home it could be the only sound for miles. Their seven-year-old daughter is sound asleep upstairs. Outside, dusk has given way to a starry night, and Jeremiah feels his patience slipping away. He's been paying for the babysitter to watch *The Red Skelton Hour* for 25 minutes already.

"Moll! You alright in there?" He'll be on display as the new guy, and making a good first impression feels like a crucial test. "Let's go!"

She emerges wearing an elegant maternity dress, a black and burgundy ensemble he's never seen before. At 27 weeks, her belly is the size of a small basketball. She's folding tissues to bring in her handbag and says she's ready.

His wife's eyes are puffy and raw, her complexion washed out, no trace of her usual gusto. She's overwrought by the day's news, an FBI report that three bodies, thought to be the missing civil rights workers, have been discovered in a Mississippi dam. Of course every well-meaning person has been troubled by the thing, all the way up to the Attorney General and the

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

President, but Molly is particularly distraught. Or it could be the pregnancy hormones; Jeremiah knows that women's emotions get all turned upside down when they're expecting.

"You look terrific. Is that new?" Anything to cheer her up so they can leave. All that crying can't be good for the baby, but he knows enough not to say anything on this sensitive topic – two miscarriages in the last three years. He plants a kiss on her cheek, salty from a stray tear and waits a beat. "Okay, now? Can we go? Can we put poor Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner out of our minds for a few hours?"

"I'll try," she says, wiping her eyes again and whispering *sorry*. Molly's family vaguely knows the Goodmans from summers in the Adirondacks. She may have babysat once or twice for young Andy and his brothers, though she'd told him she couldn't recall with certainty. It's not a stretch to imagine that if the voter registration business had been going on a decade ago, when Molly was 22, she'd have wanted to join the efforts. Jeremiah admires the fresh-faced, idealistic Mississippi Summer Project workers but wonders about the sensibility of going deep into Klan territory.

The main thing now was to get to the party and apologize for their tardiness.

In the car, Jeremiah switches off the radio. "Enough news for one day," he says and Molly nods in agreement. Though they've been in Stockbridge a week already, the cocktail feels like the official start to this chapter in their lives, his department the window through which they'll begin to acclimate. Many additional tasks remain before they'll start to feel settled, like finding a pediatrician, joining a synagogue, and meeting with Hannah's teacher.

Jeremiah drums his fingers on the steering wheel. Despite a Ph.D. from Columbia and almost a decade of government experience, it's been years since he's lived and breathed in a

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

university setting. He's a greenhorn in the world of publishing and tenure battles, not to mention teaching.

"You're nervous." She reaches over to give his leg a squeeze.

"Me? No! I just don't like being late!"

He flicks the radio back on. After a few moments of static, the announcer's voice comes alive, talking about some aggression in the Gulf of Tonkin. "Jesus. Tough day for LBJ." Jeremiah envisages the Sit Room, his former colleagues debating a course of action in Southeast Asia. The President would be leaning forward asking pointed questions while staffers reviewed the dispatches from the *USS Maddox*. LBJ tended to become volatile when forced to make a decision without all the facts, so they'll be trying to give him clear and concise information. Two weeks have passed since Jeremiah's last day at the National Security Council, and for the first time he is nostalgic: he misses the meetings in Bundy's damp basement office, the breeze of staffers rushing through narrow corridors with important telexes. Eight years in DC working for Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson, and boy does he have stories! Nervous to meet a bunch of political scientists? Ha! He's never been more confident, certain his experience will give him instant credibility with these guys.

He turns left onto the Daltons' street but the closest he can park is two houses away; here in well-to-do Lenox the properties are farther apart than in Stockbridge. The August evening is mild, and he hears chatter echoing from the backyard. They follow a lit brick path leading from the driveway past evergreens and sculpted shrubbery until a small crowd comes into view. Bill Dalton, the department chairman, tends bar on a bluestone patio. Dalton is broad-shouldered but not portly, a head of gray hair that curls at the back and gentle eyes that suggest a kind pastor.

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

His wife Marion looks equally clerical, almost stalwart in her short-sleeved blazer and matching skirt.

“We’re so sorry we’re late,” Molly says to Marion, who motions to the waitress, an older black woman in a white apron, to bring over the tray of hors d’oeuvres.

“Well hello,” Bill calls. “You’re finally here!”

Jeremiah winces and forces a smile as two dozen pairs of eyes turn towards them. He removes his hand from Molly’s back and waves to the group.

“Hello!” Molly’s tone is cheerful. “Jeremiah was ready ages ago,” she says. “I’m the reason we’re late!” She indicates her pregnant stomach. He knows Molly is saying this to make it clear that Jeremiah is punctual, someone dependable, but he wishes she wouldn’t make such a show of it.

The women in the crowd nod and coo and immediately gather around Molly while Jeremiah is introduced to his new colleagues. They seem an impressive bunch, with doctorates from Yale, Berkeley, Minnesota and Notre Dame. That the department includes one female professor (Joy McGratten, international relations) and one Negro (Nathaniel Williams, political communications) speaks well of his new institution, he thinks. The faculty members pepper Jeremiah with questions about his experience in Washington. What’s the mood like, the gossip on the upcoming election?

Jeremiah has a lot to say and he might as well admit it: he enjoys the attention. They’re gathered around him like he’s some kind of superstar. And when has that happened before? Certainly not at the NSC where – if he’s honest with himself – he was an assistant to the assistant

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

of the man in charge. His NSC colleagues never gave enough credence to his analyses or position papers. And even after so many years, he never felt like a Washington insider. He'd left in search of a place that he might make his intellectual home. A small university, but growing in prestige, that would give him both the leeway to dig deeper in his research and the potential to be recognized for it.

Jeremiah swallows the last of his beer and Dalton immediately replaces it with a gin and tonic. He's not a heavy drinker and he should get more food in his system before he gets soused. With perfect timing, a waiter emerges holding an assortment of Melba toasts, deviled eggs and cheese straws. Jeremiah would love to take a few of each but he doesn't want to appear piggish, and selects two. He gives a friendly nod to the waiter, hoping he'll return soon.

The circle disperses into smaller side conversations, and when he finds himself alone for a moment he scopes the scene, trying to keep track of who's who: the colleague wearing a US Navy Veteran pin on his lapel is an expert in European politics, the two standing to the side engaged in an animated discussion on Khrushchev's reforms are Cordelia and Baxter? Or Baswell? Williams mentions working on the Stevenson and Kennedy campaigns as a minority liaison. Someone else is talking about his year at Oxford. He's overwhelmed – Molly is far better at socializing than he is.

A glance at his wife confirms this. The ladies are asking about her due date, other children, and how she's finding the Berkshires so far. They offer compliments on her outfit and urge her to eat. She is friendly, no trace of her grief from earlier in the evening.

McGratten seeks him out to quiz him on the need for the NSC. "But don't you agree with Kennedy's assessment – that there's no need to have a little state department in the White

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

House?” she asks. “That the NSC should serve in an advisory role to the President, not a policymaking one?”

“Well, mostly it is. But look at the Bay of Pigs. The State Department did a terrible job of coordinating the Administration’s response. So that’s when Kennedy gave back some review powers to the NSC. Plus Bundy has – had – Kennedy’s ear, and LBJ’s as well.”

“Seems like a lot of extra bureaucracy to me,” says Cordelia, who shrugs, downs his whiskey, and saunters away before Jeremiah can reply.

There is a bit of truth to this assertion, though despite its problems, Jeremiah is proud of his former agency. He can’t help making snap judgements about his new colleagues, certain they are appraising him as well. Cordelia, possibly a lush. Williams, quiet. McGratten, sharp but something irritating about her laugh. Bill Dalton is paternal, nodding with approval as Jeremiah describes the syllabi of his first two courses: *The Economics of Foreign Policy* and *The Politics of Decision-making*.

Jeremiah wanders in search of the waiter for more food but is pulled into a new circle before he can find him. Someone cracks a joke about graduate students; someone else is talking about the close-range images of the moon recently taken by the Ranger 7 voyage. Jeremiah catches Molly’s eye for a moment and winks.

Bill moves through the crowd, refilling drinks, and Marion calls their attention to the dessert table. Jeremiah makes his way over and takes a few sugar cookies, passing over the runny Jello mold. By the second dry bite, his mouth turns pasty, the faint sugar crystals not reason enough to keep chewing. He slides his uneaten cookies back onto the serving plate and hopes no

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

one will notice. Next time he'll offer Molly's baking skills; her pecan pie and peanut butter chocolate chip cookies will be the talk of the evening.

He is moving off to the side to make room for others when he catches someone doing a poor imitation of a Yiddish accent. *Vell, I can't complain: my oldest at Harvard and my youngest at Yale. Better boys, I couldn't ask!*

"What's that all about?" Jeremiah asks someone standing nearby.

"Some guy in the math department," comes the response. "Never shuts up about how his boys are his own private victory over Hitler."

His mouth drops open at the sting, but at that moment Bill clinks his fork on a glass. The department head wishes everyone a year of fruitful research, approved grant proposals, committed students and success in publication. He thanks the wives for supporting their men (ignoring McGratten's poor sod of a husband), and welcomes Jeremiah and Gunther Baswell, the other new member of the department.

Jeremiah smiles and nods, though he's a bit pickled from the drinks and his mind is awlirl. *What the heck?* Were they making fun of a European refugee? What lies under the surface never ceases to shake him. It dawns on Jeremiah that there are no Levines or Goldbergs in the political science department, no Rubins or Roths. The word "token" pops into his mind, unbidden.

Marion Dalton emerges from the kitchen with the news that the President will be holding a live press conference soon. She invites anyone who'd like to watch into the parlor.

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

“Some announcement about the aggression in the Gulf of Tonkin,” Jeremiah says. Several nods indicate they’re assuming the same.

The party gathers inside, crowding the small television, but there’s a delay with the press conference. Side conversations continue, and footage from Mississippi rolls across the screen. How strange that no one’s mentioned this news at the party. Because Williams is here? Or are civil rights not something on the minds of his new colleagues?

“Remind me again what you’re teaching? I’m sure you said earlier but I haven’t gotten everyone’s fields sorted out yet,” Jeremiah says to Williams, small talk his method to segue into what he wants to ask. Williams is younger than Jeremiah, thin-faced with a pointy goatee and ebony browline glasses.

“I’m teaching one course called Mass Media and Democracy, and another on campaigns, voting and the press.” His voice is even, a bit cool and reserved, but not rude.

“Right, right! Political communications. I’ve got a friend who teaches a course at GW on the tension between a free press and national security decision-making. Fascinating subject. If you’d ever like to develop something similar, I’d be happy to collaborate.”

Williams is thoughtful for a second. “Sure.” There’s a twinge of a southern accent and Jeremiah remembers that Williams is from Alabama.

“So what do you make of all this news today?” Jeremiah motions towards the television. “My wife is pretty broken up over it, and I can’t get those boys out of my head either.” The three young men on the FBI’s missing poster, a black face flanked by two white ones, will be seared on the collective memory of the nation, he’s sure.

“Tragic,” Williams says, and then after a pause: “but hardly surprising.”

Jeremiah creases his brow, astonished at Williams’ nonchalance. Before he can reply Williams shakes his head and purses his lips. “I’m not sure you want to hear what I think.”

“Sure I do. That’s why I asked!” Jeremiah emits a nervous laugh, trying to sound congenial, though Williams’ tone puts him on edge. Had he mistakenly assumed a certain sense of solidarity between them, as representatives of two oppressed people? Their rabbi in DC had marched with Dr. King in Birmingham, and had encouraged the Gerstlers – indeed their entire synagogue – to get out and show their support by attending the March on Washington last August.

“Well, quite frankly this whole media circus makes me a bit sick.” The veins on Williams’ neck contract as he takes a swallow of beer. His voice rises in disgust.

“But...”

Williams cuts him off. “Do you know that in the six weeks the FBI’s been searching for those workers, they found nine – NINE! – bodies of black men and boys? Henry Dee, Charles Moore, Herbert Oarsby! A 14-year-old boy. I’d like to know where the outrage is over that. The coverage in the *New York Times*? It’s only because *this time* two of them were white.”

“Oh!” Jeremiah’s eyes widen in surprise; he hadn’t heard about the other bodies. “That’s terrible.” He desperately wants Williams to know that he’s on his side. “We’ve got a friend of the family who went down there with the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights, filing briefs and affidavits for some of the people getting arrested at the voting rights marches.”

“Yeah?”

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

“He said the whites down there were accusing him and all the other civil rights workers of being agitators. This guy told him – his quote – that before ‘all the Jews and Communists from New York’ got involved, they’d always had congenial relations with the local Negroes.”

“Oh sure, centuries of congenial relations.” Williams spits the words, his voice bitter. “Don’t get me wrong: the volunteers are fine but it’s the local Negroes who’re on the front lines.”

“Right.” Jeremiah nods. He cups his chin and moves his fist to cover his mouth, lips puckered as he considers what to say next. “I was very impressed with Dr. King’s speech last August. He’s a great leader for your people.”

“You were at the March?” There’s a note of curiosity.

Now he’d done it, backed himself into a corner with his own fumbling stupidity. “Well, no, not exactly...” This is the last thing Jeremiah wants to admit, after making such a show of it.

Williams gives him a pitying look. “Right.”

“I couldn’t get off work, but I read the transcripts of the speeches in the paper,” he says.

“I was there,” Molly says. As if he’s waved a magic wand, his wife has appeared at his side. “I’ll never forget it.”

Williams seems to consider this information with a nod to Molly. In the background, the network broadcasts images of the civil rights workers from different stages of their lives. Andy Goodman as a young boy in a pirate costume. Chaney’s baby daughter, born 11 days before her father was murdered. Schwerner’s college graduation picture.

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

Molly blinks back tears and bites her lip. “Oh, it’s just awful.” She tells Williams of her tenuous babysitting connection to the victim.

“We’ve got a handful of students down there volunteering right now,” Williams says.

“Very good!” Jeremiah says. “And how are they?”

“Shaken up. But determined.”

Marion Dalton is listening in earnest to their conversation. She frowns. “Our son wanted to volunteer in Selma last summer, but I told him in no uncertain terms that we wouldn’t support it. Too dangerous.”

Jeremiah starts – the Daltons struck him as liberal-minded people, though perhaps Marion is employing a mother’s caution. Aside from a flicker of irritation in Williams’ eyes, his face stays passive, as if he’s heard this reasoning a million times.

“Well, I can understand your concern, as a mother,” Molly says. “But don’t you think the volunteers are doing important work down there?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t understand what’s so hard about registering to vote,” Marion says. “Why do they need college students to help them with such a simple task?”

Jeremiah turns, expecting Williams to explain, but he’s already spun around and walked away. Jeremiah feels a need to save the situation. “Wait! Nathaniel, come back!” Williams ignores him and heads out to the garden. Doesn’t Marion know that Negroes in the south can lose their jobs – or worse – by registering to vote? And that the process in some states includes hours and hours of waiting, inane questions about the state constitution? Stumbling blocks and threats of violence from every direction.

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

But Marion is focused on Williams' abrupt departure. "Honestly, I don't know why he needs to be so uppity."

Molly's mouth drops open and Jeremiah feels the prick of Marion's words. He's been on the receiving end of slurs – rebuffed for jobs due to questions over his "antecedents," denied guest entry to a country club in Bethesda, and what was that business a few minutes ago, making fun of a European refugee? He's never considered what it must be like to live in black skin. To face ignorance and bigotry everywhere.

The TV set flashes to Rita Schwerner, the 22-year-old widow, rebroadcasting her statement from earlier today. She is pencil-thin, a mound of sandy-brown hair piled high on her head, her collared shirtdress belted severely at the waist. At the microphone, she removes oversized sunglasses and looks into the cameras, palpable grief ripples over her gaunt face. Through the White House grapevine, Jeremiah had heard how she'd faced down the President, dismissing LBJ's niceties and demanding he commit federal troops for the search. "Remarkable young woman," Jeremiah says.

"My husband, Michael Schwerner, did not die in vain," says Mrs. Schwerner. "If he and Andrew Goodman had been Negroes, the world would have taken little notice of their deaths. After all, the slaying of a Negro in Mississippi is not news." She repeats the same point Williams made 10 minutes ago. "It is only because my husband and Andrew Goodman were white that the national alarm has been sounded."

Rita Schwerner says she wants her husband to be buried next to James Chaney, but even in death, the State of Mississippi will not allow a white man and a black man to be buried next to each other. Why this fact should be harder to swallow than all the others Jeremiah doesn't know,

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

but he feels a grinding sense of frustration. Would America ever be free of the scourge of slavery? Something told him no. Erasing hatred from people's hearts was damn near impossible. Ignorance, perhaps. The key was to catch the ignorance before it turned to bigotry and hatred.

At last, the press conference begins and there is quiet in the Daltons' parlor. LBJ is solemn as he assails the torpedo attacks on the high seas. In his familiar Texas twang, the President says the United States will react with force and take all necessary measures against aggression in Southeast Asia. Jeremiah is half listening.

He finds Williams in the garden, steering his wife towards the exit.

"Nathaniel, there you are!"

"Yes?"

"You missed the press conference!" Jeremiah realizes he doesn't have the foggiest idea of what to say. He wants to show some outrage over Marion's narrow-mindedness, or to show that he's not prejudiced himself. "I...uh...I'm sorry if I said something in there to make you feel uncomfortable." As the words come out he knows it's not a true apology – he doesn't know what he's done wrong, and his phrasing, *sorry...if* puts the onus on Williams.

"Sometimes I don't know why I bother. I guess I'm just sick and tired of it all. Of all these lynchings, and the government playing around with black lives. Do you really think the people responsible are going to sit in prison, even for a day?"

Again, Jeremiah's taken aback by Williams' tone. He shifts from foot to foot. "Well, if they make some arrests."

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

“Make arrests?” Williams’ voice brims with frustration. “The sheriffs ARE the goddam Klan!”

“Yes, but the Feds are on the case.”

Williams shakes his head in disgust. “Even if they make arrests, a Mississippi jury’s not going to convict anyone. But you know what else? It wouldn’t happen with a Massachusetts jury either! Northerners think they’re so superior to the good old boys down south! Please. There’s plenty of racism to go around up here.”

Williams’ wife is tugging on his arm; *let’s go*, she seems to be saying.

“But surely here in New England...”

“Surely, nothing!” Williams says. “Boston’s one of the most segregated cities in the country! Never mind. I don’t expect you to understand. And I don’t expect white people to do the battle for us. What I want is for black people to stand up.”

“I can understand that,” Jeremiah says. A feeble effort.

Williams squints his eyes at him as if Jeremiah is no less of an imbecile than Marion. And maybe he isn’t. His stomach clenches. Williams opens his mouth as if he’s about to disagree, about to come out with more fighting words, but then he seems to take a step back. His derision turns into an appraisal as if he’s not quite sure what to make of Jeremiah. Whether he is worth hearing what Williams thinks. At last he sighs and puts out his hand to shake Jeremiah’s. “Alright, see you around.”

Jeremiah watches William and his wife make their retreat, the heels of her shoes slapping against the stone walk. Good god. Jeremiah replays the conversations in his head. Had he

TOUGH DAY FOR LBJ

touched some nerve or did the man always sound so radical? He's at once offended and intrigued. It is time to find Molly and say their goodbyes.

The room is half full with Jeremiah's new colleagues; a few engaged in a debate on whether LBJ's announcement constitutes a change in the Johnson doctrine in Southeast Asia. But Jeremiah doesn't jump into the conversation and no one asks his opinion. The interaction with Williams has shaken his confidence; he doesn't know why he feels so bothered. Perhaps he'd been searching for an ally and Williams was the other natural outsider, but whatever bond he'd assumed they shared existed in his mind alone. Or his discomfort may have to do with his reaction – or lack thereof – to past slights. Was he too quick to squirrel them away, pretend as though they were nothing?

“I think you'll do fine here,” Molly says as they're walking out.

“I don't know, honestly.” Was a true sense of belonging attainable? Now that he's met everyone it seems more out of reach, but he reminds himself it is the beginning. The party was not a smashing success but nor was it an abysmal failure. His head pounds. And what to say to the young minds who will fill his classroom, one month from now, when he's still got so much to learn? He's got nothing to offer them. No guidance, no wisdom. Only the world's sorrow and anger, without a recipe for a cure.

He reaches for his wife – Molly is his rock, his grounding. She places his hand on her midriff. “Feel.” Their unborn child is kicking.

- End -